THE DOOR OF DREAMS

BY

JESSIE B. RITTENHOUSE

Short & singing
love poems

BY THE COMPILER OF
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and Other Kentucky Tales in Verse

BY

WILLIAM ASPENWALL BRADLEY

Not long ago the author of these poems was detained several months by serious illness and long convalescence in the very heart of the feud region of the Kentucky mountains.

He grew then to understand the mountaineers as few outsiders can. Preachers and "killers," sheriffs and moonshiners, drunken fiddlers and saints in linsey-woolsey, he knew them all; saw the moonshiners' wives bringing in corn whiskey from the stills when the "revenues were raiding round right smart," heard the old folks crooning ballads to the sound of the dulcimer; listened to tales of witchcraft and love spells, of bloody feuds, and men shot down from ambush.

The tales he heard, the characters he knew, and the adventures he met with, Mr. Bradley has woven into narrative verse, reproducing with dramatic effect the thrill of the stories and the atmosphere of the wildest and least-known corner of America.

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THE DOOR OF DREAMS

BY

JESSIE B. RITTENHOUSE

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"THE LITTLE BOOK OF MODERN VERSE"
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I often passed the Door of Dreams
But never stepped inside,
Though sometimes, with surprise, I saw
The door was open wide.

I might have gone forever by,
As I had done before,
But one day, when I passed, I saw
You standing in the door.

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THE DOOR OF DREAMS

[I]

THE DOOR OF DREAMS

DEBT

My debt to you, Belovéd,
Is one I cannot pay
In any coin of any realm
On any reckoning day;

For where is he shall figure
The debt, when all is said,
To one who makes you dream again
When all the dreams were dead?

Or where is the appraiser
Who shall the claim compute,
Of one who makes you sing again
When all the songs were mute?

APART

Ah, now that I have loved you,
I can no longer go
Across the wide, eternal sea
When spring winds blow;

I cannot look on Como
When the moon drifts through the air
And all the rapt, still mountains
Stand by, as if aware;

I cannot watch the fishermen,
Home in the early day,
Spread all their dripping nets to dry
By blue Salerno Bay, —

I cannot look on Italy
For, if we are apart,
The pang of all her loveliness
Would break my heart!

SILENCE

O MANY and vain, Belovéd,
The words I spoke to you
In those first wondering hours
When love was new!

Now we have wandered together
Into a mystic land,
Now we are silent, Belovéd,
Because we understand.

WORDS

I WEAVE you, dear, when you are far,
Words fairer than all things that are:
Words fairer than the light that falls
At night in Rome on ruined walls;
Words fairer than an Alpine Spring
When all the dawn is glistening;
Words fairer than the petals shed
From the pomegranate's blossom red.

And all these words, in dreams apart,
Keep a still wonder in my heart,
And every night they carry me
Out on a tide of ecstasy,
And every day they bring me back
Along the same enchanted track,
Until that one day when you come,
And our eyes meet — and I am dumb!

LOSS

Once was the need of you
A pain too great to bear,
And all my heart went calling you
In work and song and prayer.

But now dull time has brought
A sadder, stranger lot —
That I should look upon the day
And find I need you not.

FROST IN SPRING

Oh, had it been in Autumn, when all is spent and
sere,
That the first numb chill crept on us, with its
ghostly hint of fear,
I had borne to see love go, with things detached and
frail,
Swept outward with the blowing leaf on the un-
resting gale.

But when day is a magic thing, when Time begins
anew,
When every clod is parted by Beauty breaking
through, —
How can it be that you and I bring Love no offer-
ing,
How can it be that frost should fall upon us in the
Spring!

PARADOX

I WENT out to the woods to-day
To hide away from you,
From you a thousand miles away —
But you came, too.

And yet the old dull thought would stay,
And all my heart benumb —
If you were but a mile away
You would not come.

RETURN

You came again, but silence
Had fallen on your heart,
And in your eyes were visions
That held us still apart.

And now I go on hearing
The words you did not say,
And the kiss you did not give me
Burns on my lips to-day.

DEFEAT

All the gifts I did not ask,
Life came and brought to me,
Until I stood amazed before
Such prodigality.

And yet I failed in my one task,
In my one enterprise, —
I could not keep the fire alight
Within your eyes.

THE HOUR

You loved me for an hour
Of all your careless days
And then you went forgetting
Down your own ways.

How could you know that Time
would work
A magic deed for me
And fix that single hour
For my eternity!

WITH SONG-BIRDS

Love came to me so many times
It grew a common thing,
I thought that it would always come
With song-birds in the Spring;

And so I dreamed and wondered
What next year's love would be,
Until one Spring there came no bird
To any blossoming tree.

THE RIVER

One sultry night a year ago
You came and sat with me
Where in the river breeze might blow
The salt breath of the sea.

You never sought my hands or lips,
There in the summer night,
We only sat and watched the ships
Shine with their double light;

And spoke the careless words, we knew
Would hide the memory
Of all that I had been to you
And you had been to me.

Then home from the dark river, swept
By searchlights on the shore,
And all that wakeful night I wept —
For you I loved no more.

EMBERS

What was once so quick and glowing,
Leaping high in flame,
Like a fire in night-wind blowing
When you spoke my name, —

Smoulders now and scarce remembers
How it burned — but mark,
If you stir the whitening embers
Still outleaps the spark!

[II]

THE GHOST

A SCORE of years you had been lying
In this spot,
Yet I, to whom you were the dearest,
Had seen it not.

And when to-day, by time emboldened,
I looked upon the stone,
'T was not your ghost that stood beside me,
But my own.

SEA-BIRDS

Birds that float upon a wave,
  Resting from the tiring air,
Be the hopes that I would save
  From despair!

Menaced by the sky above,
  Menaced by the deep below,
You rock as on the breast of Love,
  To and fro.

If immensities like these
  Cannot fright a thing so frail,
I will keep my heart at ease
  In the gale!

THE BELL-BUOY

The far-off bell-buoy in the fog
  Keeps ringing momently,
It does not sound to me at all
  Like wave-rung bells at sea;

I only hear as it drifts in,
  Softened by spaces wide,
The church-bells of my childhood ring
  Across the countryside.

A SKIFF

A SKIFF upon the inland streams,
And not a frigate on the sea,
Is this, my heart, that drifts and dreams
In sweet, alluring vagrancy.

Out there upon the main, I know,
Brave galleons of thought set sail,
And there the winds of fortune blow,
And there the master hopes prevail;

And oft insistently a tide
Sets seaward in my restless heart,
And I upon the deep would ride
And in the traffic bear a part.

And yet what stays me, that I lie
At morning by some green-fringed marge,
And smile to see the schooner high,
And smile to see the barge.

And know that they will reach the main
League-lengths ahead of me,
And bear their cargo home again,
Ere I have dared the sea?

INLAND WATERS

Inland waters by the sea,
Sad in your tranquillity,
How good if you could share the shock
Of breakers beating on the rock;
How good if you could fly in spray
On your rainbow wings away;
How good if sea-gulls on your breast,
With wide wings dipping, came to rest!

How dull it is that you should stay
Locked within your hills alway;
How sad it is you cannot know
Great ships passing to and fro;
How calm the winds that bring no breath
Of terror, danger, pain, and death! —
And yet how many lives must be
Like inland waters by the sea.

MY WAGE

I BARGAINED with Life for a penny,
And Life would pay no more,
However I begged at evening
When I counted my scanty store;

For Life is a just employer,
He gives you what you ask,
But once you have set the wages,
Why, you must bear the task.

I worked for a menial's hire,
Only to learn, dismayed,
That any wage I had asked of Life,
Life would have paid.

WINDOWS

I LOOKED through others' windows
  On an enchanted earth,
But out of my own window—
  Solitude and dearth.

And yet there is a mystery
  I cannot understand—
That others through my window
  See an enchanted land.

MYSELF

They look at me as if they knew me,
All these people whom I meet,
But to myself I am a stranger
Passing in the street.

I meet the stranger's eyes with question
Looking into mine,
And with a sudden recognition
We give a sign.

Then we are lost again, we mingle
In the effacing crowd,
And I forget those eyes that called me
As though one spoke aloud, —

Until another signal moment
Flashes identity,
And in the maze of life, arrested,
My soul looks out at me.

THE DOME OF ST. LUKE'S HOSPITAL

Across the street from me St. Luke's
Towers gray and high,
And my two windows frame the dome
Lifting against the sky.

From Morningside the rising sun
First lights the cross for me,
And from Riverside the setting sun
Lingers that I may see;

While all day long a sculptured saint,
Holding a mystic book,
Turns from it to my window pane
As straight as he can look.

The doves that house in every niche,
Circle about his head,
And on the hands that hold the book,
Rest and are comforted.

Now every week within those walls
They tell me many die,
And yet I only see the dome
Lifting against the sky.

CALVARY

I WALKED alone to my calvary,
And no man carried the cross for me.
Carried the cross? Nay, no man knew
The fearful load that I bent unto,
But each as we met upon the way
Spoke me fair of the journey I walked
that day.

I came alone to my calvary,
And high was the hill and bleak to see,
But lo, as I scaled its flinty side,
A thousand went up to be crucified!
A thousand kept the way with me,
But never a cross my eyes could see.

ANN TO DE QUINCEY

You questioned, all the restless years,
Why I, who went from you with tears,
Should not have come again to share
Your nights of wandering vigil there.

You sought my face in every face
In London streets, but found no trace
Of her who gave you wine and bread
And pillowed on her breast your head.

O blinded eyes, did you not see
Because I loved I left you free?
For Oxford Street to one outcast
Must be stepmother to the last.

THE FUNERAL BARGE

In Venice once I saw a funeral barge,
I had not dreamed death could so lovely be,
Nor that one might in peace so utter calm
Float to infinity.

Under a black-plumed canopy he lay,
Upon a velvet dais, flower-sweet,
Two boatmen rowed in silence at his head,
Two boatmen at his feet.

And softer than a breast of feathered bird
The great swan barge moved downward to the sea,
While singers following made all the air
Sweet with a threnody.

I watched them bear him seaward with a song,
To rest at last his island bed upon,
And in my heart, entranced with Death, I knew
That isle was Avalon!

WHITE PEACOCKS

To Sara Teasdale

Once at Isola Bella,
With sunset in the sky,
We stood on the topmost terrace—
You and I.

Around us Lago Maggiore,
Incomparably fair,
Gave back the hues of heaven
To the Italian air.

Then up the marble terrace,
Below the cypress trees,
Came a flock of milk-white peacocks
With fans spread to the breeze.

Rose-pink on each outspread feather,
Rose-pink upon the crest —
Never were birds in plumage
So ravishingly drest!

Wherever we walked, they followed,
Stately at our feet;
No picture so enchanting
Will any hour repeat.

And here in the murky city
Those milk-white peacocks seem
To follow and follow me ever,
Like ghosts of a haunting dream.

THE DESERT ROSE

"Who, passing through the valley of Baca, make it a well."

I THOUGHT, dear heart, that we had gone
Too far beneath the desert sun
To breathe again that flower of flowers,
That bloom of blooms in one.

But now I see — oh, miracle
Of Very Love that cannot fail! —
That two who through the desert pass
Shall make of it a well;

And on its brink shall flowers spring
For their eternal comforting,
And from parched skies a singing bird
Shall light and dip its wing!

FREEDOM

Be free of me as any bird
That circles in the air,
Be free of me as any cloud
That mountain summits wear;

Be free as any wandering wind
That blows across the sea,
Be free as any restless wave
That moves continually

For freest things must tire of flight,
And restless things must rest,
And all the lonesome winds will drive
You to my breast!

JOY

Now I can sing of happy things
And let the sad world go its way,
Since you have spoken words that turn
The night to day.

Now I can sow beside all streams
And care not if another reap,
Since all that I would garner here
Is mine to keep.

Now I can scatter joy about
Like green young leaves that fall in
spring,
Because the tree is all too rich
In bourgeoning!

WHEN YOU GO

When you go, a hush falls
Over all my heart,
And in a trance of my own dreams
I move apart.

When you go, the street grows
Like a vacant place —
What if a million faces pass
If not your face?

When you go, my life stops
Like ships becalmed at sea,
And waits the breath from heaven
that blows
You back to me.

A SEA-CHANGE

Once in a year of wonder
I brought to you a dream,
And all your waves gave back to me
Only its gleam.

But now I come again, O Sea,
Under a changing sky,
And all your waves lie gray and still
As dreams that die.

THE END

Let us cease now; it is too late to wonder
That love should prove a mortal thing at last,
Or that corrosive Time at length should sunder
That which was bound so fast.

Let us cease now; it is too late for weeping,
It is too late to stay what would be gone.
Sometime the caged thing will escape its keeping
And leave but emptiness to ponder on.

Let us cease now, and without indecision.
That all is lost, there is no room for doubt—
We were not great enough for Love, the Vision,
And love, the flame, has swept us and burnt out!

THE ANGEL OF THE SWORD

The angel with the flaming sword
  Has shut me out from heaven's gate,
And I may not reënter there,
  Though long I wait;

And yet, O Angel of the Sword,
  I do not grudge the thrust you deal,
For still the keenest pain of wounds
  Is that wounds heal!

THE AVOWAL

If I had told you not,
Then might you still to me
Be my soul's secret fane,
My dream, my mystery.

But now a word has rent
The temple veil apart,
And shown me that the secret fane
Is empty — as my heart.

RELEASE

What can you care, forgetful Time,
  Who drop all sweet things by the way,
How long this voice within my heart
  Should call to me, and stay?

So loose me, Time, and let me go,
  No longer to old dreams a thrall —
Yet with what dream shall I replace
  That sweetest dream of all?

INTERLUDE

Often in fear, Belovéd,
I think that it is gone,
This love that made our days and nights
A hope to dream upon.

And then in some wonderful moment
It springs again to flower,
And you and I are re-living
That first great hour!

VALUES

O Love, could I but take the hours
That once I spent with thee,
And coin them all in minted gold,
What should I purchase that would hold
Their worth in joy to me?
Ah, Love, — another hour with thee!

THE GHOSTLY GALLEY

When comes the ghostly galley
  Whose rowers dip the oar
Without a sound to startle us,
  Unheeding on the shore, —

If they should beckon you aboard
  Before they beckon me,
How could I bear the waiting time
  Till I should put to sea!

[IV]

THE COAT OF MAIL

To-DAY came word incredible —
That one whom I love passing well,
One dear as my own soul to me,
Must meet the dark extremity,
And weeks alone might keep alight
That spirit battling with the night.

What can I say to one who goes
Foredoomed to fall before his foes?
Mock him with hope that he may be
More valiant than his enemy?
Commend to him the shield of trust,
Invulnerable to every thrust?

No, in these days supreme and few
Leave him to forge an armor new;
For he alone, by day, by night,
Can weld the burnished links aright
Till at the last he shall prevail,
Clad in his spirit's coat of mail.

TO ONE DYING IN WAR-TIME

You hear the marching of their feet,
  You know your comrades go to war,
You know that you will never march
  To music, more.

You lie and dream through waning hours
  Of soldiers splendid in array,
And how the bugles must be calling
  At break of day.

You think how gladly you would go
  To where the fight is heaviest,
But weariness is on you now,
  And you must rest.

Yet do not grieve, O stricken heart,
  A keener bugle yet shall blow,
And in the march of nobler hosts
  Your feet shall go!

SONGS TO ONE PASSING

I

Your wistful eyes that day you left,
They haunt me all the night,
I never saw in any eyes
So mystical a light.

I knew the day you went from me
That you would come no more,
And yet I said the casual words
That I had said before.

If only then I had been true
And held you in my arms,
And shielded you a moment's space
From death's alarms!

II

The world of careless people
It will not even know

The day your lonely spirit
  Is called to go;

Nor all the months of exile,
  Lying on your bed,
That you have heard the wings of death
  Hovering overhead.

To all the careless people
  Who hurry to and fro
That day will be as other days —
  But I shall know.

III

I cannot sing, words mock me so.
I cannot sing, I only know
That you are lying far from me,
Almost within the Mystery.

I only wonder what you think
As you draw nearer to the brink,
I only wonder whose the hand
Will welcome you to that strange land.

IV

I send no message to you now,
There are no words to say,
I would not grieve you by a thought
Before you go away;

But thoughts of mine already fledge
Themselves for farther flight,
And they will meet you when you come
Within The Light!

A NIGHTINGALE AT FRESNOY

Never, they say, were guns so loud,
Never were flames so bright,
As those that made at Fresnoy
Inferno of the night;

And when the searchlight fires lit
The slender, new-green trees,
They could be seen to tremble
As never in a breeze.

At Fresnoy in the little wood
Just greening with the spring,
A nightingale, undaunted,
Lifted his voice to sing;

And in each moment's silence
When torn earth held her breath,
Before the fearful guns again
Uttered their Song of Death, —

The nightingale, oblivious
Of all the ghastly strife,
Was heard within the little wood
To sing the Song of Life!

TO POETS WHO FALL IN BATTLE

You who go to battle,
  Careless of eclipse,
And quaff Death like a beaker
  Brimming to the lips, —

You who seek in battle
  Things that cannot fail,
And raise this brimming beaker
  As if it were the Grail, —

Thanks to you who show me
  What the soul can be!
God speed to you, brothers,
  And a glad eternity!

"I HAVE NO LOVER ON THE BATTLEFIELD"

I HAVE no lover on the battlefield,
I do not go with sickening fear at heart,
And when the crier calls the latest horror
I do not start.
I have no lover on the battlefield,
I am exempt from terror of the night,
I can lie down, serene and unregarding,
Until the light.

But on the battlefield had I a lover,
How life would purge itself of petty pain,
And what would matter all the petty losses,
The petty gain?
I should be one with those who suffer greatly,
With pain all pain above,
And I should know then, beyond peradventure,
The heart of Love!

PATRINS

You know, dear, that the gipsies strew
Some broken boughs along the way
To mark the trail for one who comes,
A tardy pilgrim of the day.

And so my songs, that have no worth
Save that best worth of being true,
Are but as patrins strewn to show
The way I came in loving you.

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